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ABSTRACT

Current school restructuring experiments are likely to result in more balanced local education systems characterized by decentralized and centralized control. The potential leadership contributions of school district superintendents in a balanced system are described in this exploratory study, which is based on agency theory, a politics-oriented analysis of organization hierarchy. Interviews with 10 predominantly male elementary school superintendents and observation of 5 superintendents indicate that the allocation of responsibility for risk, understanding of the system as a whole, and integration of school district and community norms and values are important leadership contributions. (40 references) (LMI)

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The National Center for School Leadership

Project Report

The Superintendency and School Leadership

Robert L Crowson and Van Cleve Morris

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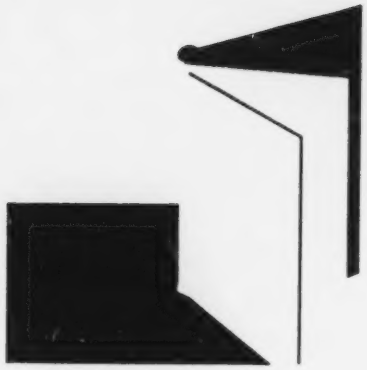

The Superintendency and School Leadership

Robert L. Crowson and Van Cleve Morris
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About The National Center for School Leadership

Our objectives are to produce new knowledge about school leadership and influence the practice and preparation of school leaders. Through various research programs and dissemination activities, we aim to give school leaders effective strategies and methods to influence teaching and learning.

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Abstract

Amid many modern-day experiments in school district restructuring, the likelihood in reality is that local education will increasingly become a more balanced blend of both centralized and decentralized control. This paper reports the results of an exploratory, qualitative inquiry into the potential leadership contributions of school district superintendents within a balanced system. The study suggests that the allocation of responsibility for "risk" in school district administration, the capacity to attend to a district-wide "big picture" amid the many little pictures of school-site empowerment, and an integration between school district and community norms/values are among the important leadership contributions of school superintendents.

The Superintendency and School Leadership

From a one-after-another run of national commission reports, to a frenzy of state legislative initiatives, to widespread local experimentation toward professionalization--America is busily reforming its public schools. A theme of much of the discussion, lawmaking, and experimentation is the need for more effective leadership in public education--a leadership that will rebuild the nation's confidence in the instruction of its school-age children.

Much of the school-reform attention has been focused, appropriately, upon leadership at the school-site. Improvements in the instructional leadership roles of building principals, in the training and performance of classroom teachers, in opportunities for the exercise of professional leadership by teachers, and in the improvement of school-parent relationships have been among the key elements of school-site reform. Strangely, far less attention to date has been directed toward leadership-understanding and leadership-improvement at the opposite end of

education's organizational hierarchy. While not completely ignored in the growing research-toward-reform literature, leadership provided by the local school district superintendent has received little acknowledgement.

Such lack of attention till now may have been a mistake. Pfeffer (1984) notes that: (a) Leadership activities and effects may vary with level in an organizational hierarchy; (b) for the most part leadership research has been over-concentrated upon first-line supervisors; and, (c) "if leadership has any impact, it should be more evident at higher organizational levels or where there is more discretion in decisions and activities" (p. 9).

Just how much leadership the higher level of the superintendent's office can (or should) provide vis-a-vis individual schools and classrooms, remains unanswered. Understandably, the many difficulties accompanying inquiry at any time into that ambiguous construct <u>leadership</u> are confounded mightily when one seeks to identify the impact of a top executive officer upon "production-level" behaviors. As Hannaway (1989)

observes, the chief executive officer in most organizations is far removed from production, typically communicates indirectly, or at best infrequently, with bottom-level employees, addresses issues (e.g., corporate relations, finance, and planning) that are not directly tied to a "technical core" of the corporate endeavor, and depends heavily upon intermediaries for adequate information about corporate operations and outputs.

While local district superintendents are not corporate CEOs and serve organizations which tend not to think in production terms, their problems of leadership-effect are much the same. The superintendent typically spends considerable time with persons who are outside the instructional mission of the school district (e.g., community leaders, local interest groups, and local politicians). The superintendent must give central attention to the acquisition of critical resources for the schools (e.g., tax dollars, facilities, and personnel) but may devote relatively little time to the direct management of those resources. Similarly, the superintendent may be viewed by

lower-level employees as a distant and mysterious figure who "hob-nobs" with the board of education and has something to do with school district policy, but represents little that is direct and tangible in their own work lives.

Here, then, is a CEO role oriented to interaction with outsiders, to policy questions rather than direct management responsibilities, and to daily tasks that distance the incumbent from the basic activities (teaching and learning) of the organization. Given these conditions of the job, how does leadership reveal itself in the ongoing life of a school system? What, in short, are the threads of connection between a superintendent's behavior and Sally Jones's achievement in the fifth grade?

Background

Recent research interest on the leadership effects of top-level executives upon their respective organizations has been of three forms. First, one school of thought would suggest that a chief executive's leadership is best approached from an indirect or

"contextual" perspective (Lieberman & O'Connor, 1972). The view is that leadership is understood only in terms of organizational structure, and that leadership research should focus upon general structure or context without actively seeking to identify too closely the direct lower-level impacts of individual leaders. Reward structures, decision-making mechanisms, organizational climate, communications linkages, employee socialization traditions, evaluation procedures--these are some of the contextual elements of a workplace that are represented in its impact upon a designated clientele. To be sure, individual executives may influence changes in these structures, but these individuals are just as likely to be influenced or constrained by the structures; thus, the structure, and perhaps the top-executive's role within it, is the decisive variable.

Second, however, other writers argue that individual leaders (even those who perform at the top) can indeed have a direct impact upon organizational production/performance (Thomas, 1988). Despite contextual constraints and the pervasiveness of

structure, leader differences at the organizational summit can filter down to and account for performance variations at the "street level" (Peterson, 1984). A change in the chief executive's behavior can be reflected in a change of mood or vision throughout an organization, and this mood (often described as either high morale or low morale) can have much to do with performance. Furthermore: (a) Small changes in reward, or even perceptions of reward, can sometimes have big effects "down below"; (b) the careful recruitment, selection, socialization, and use of staff can provide a valuative tie that binds from top to bottom; and, (c) the many operating procedures, rules, directives, and evaluative mechanisms that necessarily exist in any organization usually "come home to roost" as (either facilitative or debilitating) influences upon bottom-of-the-organization behaviors.

However, a third group of writers would assert that the top executive's leadership occurs on a unique and separate plane of organizational activity, a plane which should not be held to production or service-delivery measures of influence. The view in this third case is

that the chief executive functions primarily at Parson's (1960) institutional level of endeavor, concerned with relating the organization to its larger social environment and correspondingly less concerned than other actors with the technical core activities. From this perspective, the leadership of a superintendent might be discovered in community relationships (e.g., handling conflict), in the translation of community mores into managerial dos-and-don'ts, in a blending of school district needs and available community resources, and in a representation of the educational profession to the local community.

Unfortunately, while all three of the above perspectives may be read into the extant literature on the superintendency, neither depth nor consensus can be drawn upon, to date, to aid in the development of a program of leadership research (Crowson, 1987). Three exemplary anomalies to be found in the literature are as follows. First, there has been surprisingly little inquiry into how superintendents manage the internal organizational affairs of their school districts. What there is suggests, puzzlingly, that: (a)

Superintendents spend the majority of their contact time with subordinates (Larson, Bussom, & Vicars, 1981), but (b) relatively little in the organizational life of individual schools occurs as a result of coordination and control activities from the superintendent's office (Hannaway & Sproull, 1978-1979).

Second, research on the politics and community-relations aspects of the superintendency suggests, puzzlingly, that: (a) Superintendents are surrounded by conflict and are highly vulnerable public officials but, alternatively, (b) school superintendents are remarkably free of conflict (in comparison with other public servants) and are relatively free from the pressures of a presumably representative democracy (see, Kerr, 1964; Cuban, 1985; Ziegler, Kehoe & Reisman, 1985). Third, and finally, studies of the characteristics of school superintendents remark upon the surprising demographic consistency of this executive role (i.e., white, male, Protestant, of rural or small-town origins)--despite simultaneous evidence of many inconsistencies and a haphazardness of preparation for, and socialization into, the role (Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Cunningham &

Hentges, 1982). In a correlational study of superintendents, March and March (1977) were unable to discern any clear connection between the differing characteristics of superintendents and specific performance behaviors. The performances of superintendents of varying backgrounds and characteristics were virtually indistinguishable. Thus, continues the argument, "little can be learned about how to administer schools by studying successful high-level administrators that could not be learned by studying unsuccessful ones" (March & March, 1977, p. 408).

The Study

In summary, inquiry into the educational leadership provided by the local school district superintendent is not deep; and what there is appears to be wrapped in contradiction. Moreover, it is not yet clear just how the superintendency best fits other ongoing research (from varying theoretical perspectives) into the leadership of the top executive officer. Furthermore, any contemporary study of the school superintendency is

now confounded by the current movement to reform local governance structures toward school-based management, teacher empowerment, and shared decision making. An essential in defining a future leadership role for the superintendent is a determination of just what services the central office should provide in an essentially decentralized system (Murphy, 1989).

Accordingly, our study of school district superintendents, and the leadership these individuals may provide in public schooling, has been designed as a loosely defined, from-the-ground-up probe into top-level administrators' work lives. With no hypothesis testing or large-scale representative sampling yet in mind, the goal in the short-term for the project has been to move carefully towards a new conceptualization of potentialities for leadership in the superintendency. During the initial year of Leadership Center inquiry, 1988-1989, data collection was devoted to an exploratory (open-ended and freewheeling) grounding of the study in the work lives, recollections, and perceptions of a small sample of experienced, Chicago-area superintendents. With the help of an advisory committee

of four school district chief executives, we compiled a list of experienced practicing superintendents (a few recently retired)--and all reputedly exceptional administrators. Between December 1988 and mid-July 1989, we conducted lengthy "life-history" interviews with 10 from our list of 50 superintendents--directing the questions with minimal structuring toward biographic summaries, career development, socialization and other mentoring experiences, good times and bad, relationships with significant others (e.g., board members, principals, and teachers), attitudes toward the job, and thoughts on both the preparation of future administrators as well as notions of leadership in the superintendency. Each loosely directed interview followed the flow of the subjects' recollections, anecdotes, and perceptions as these came to mind and expression.

Additionally, during 1988-1989, we continued a form of data collection inaugurated experimentally in 1987-1988. We engaged in the direct observation of two practicing superintendents (one long-experienced and one relatively new to the position). In each case, the

inquiry involved a simple shadowing of the superintendent for some five non-consecutive workdays, involving in each case board-meeting days (their preparation and aftermath). Two superintendents had been shadowed in 1987-1988 and two again in 1988-1989; however, one subject's observations were maintained through both research years.

Among the local (practicing and retired) superintendents interviewed and shadowed thus far, all but one have been white males. Furthermore, all have been Chicago-area superintendents; and, with Illinois' dual-district structure, all but one have been superintendents of elementary (K-8) school districts. Our own responses from just one female superintendent to date, and the larger-scale inquiries of Bell and Chase (1988, 1989) into women in the superintendency, suggest that to continue an over-representation of male superintendents would be a serious research-design error. Additionally, of course, our study must expand to include many more secondary-level and unit-district superintendents and must extend beyond suburbia and Illinois.

The superintendents interviewed and observed thus far have been the (present and former) administrators of middle-sized suburban school districts of between 2,000 and 5,000 students. With just two exceptions, the subjects thus far have been in their late 50s and 60s. The two exceptions are the one less-experienced superintendent (in his 30s) and another who, although much experienced, has just turned 50. The communities served by our subjects have ranged from blue collar and lower middle-class to professional, white collar, and upper middle-class. Geographically, they have included northern, western, and southern suburbs, including suburbs bordering Chicago. It is important to remember that our subjects thus far have tended to be male, long-experienced, and representative of suburban Illinois. Our findings should by no means be interpreted as conclusive or generalizable.

A Conceptual Framework

Our inquiry into the school district superintendency is merely exploratory at this time; it is an effort toward theory construction rather than

theory testing. Our further recognition, however, is that no piece of research is entirely conception free. Despite a data collection strategy of a wide-ranging, non-directive, go-with-the-flow nature, we have admittedly been operating from a rough conceptual framework--as an expression of our major investigative interest and as a guide toward some primitive focusing in data analysis. The key constructs growing out of the conceptual framework are neither well defined nor readily interpretable at this stage; thus, our inquisitiveness is still rooted in a general curiosity and a "let's see" perspective.

The conceptual parameters around our study of the local superintendency bear a similarity to a growing literature on the "micropolitics" of schools (Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1986; Blase, 1988). However, where micropolitics is (as the name implies) typically a within-school analysis, our interest extends to the larger context of the local school district and its more macro political interactions. We draw upon a literature with a different label (agency theory) but with much the same emphasis upon exchange relationships, individuals'

self-interests, and organizational incentives that are conceptualized within micropolitical theory.

Agency theory is a politics-oriented inquiry into organizational hierarchies (Moe, 1984). Its central thesis is that organizational hierarchies can be viewed as chains of principal-agent relationships, wherein a hierarchical superior (principal) enters into a relationship with a subordinate (the agent) "in expectation that the agent will subsequently choose actions that produce outcomes desired by the principal" (p. 756). It is understood, theoretically, that the relationship between principal and agent will likely be interest- and incentive-driven on both sides. Each actor will be engaged in the pursuit of his or her own interests and the agent will be "induced to pursue the principal's objectives only to the extent that the incentive structure imposed in their contract renders such behavior advantageous" (p. 756).

The argument is that chains of principal-agent relationships exist throughout the political hierarchy of education. Thus, state education authorities are principals and local school districts are their agents.

Community residents are principals and board members are their agents. Superintendents are in a principal relationship to site-level administrators as their agents. And building administrators are principals to school staff members as agents. From citizen to educator and from state to locality, agency relationships range up and down the hierarchy of government--with nearly every actor occupying a dual role as both principal and agent (Moe, 1984, pp. 757-758). Furthermore, although conceptualized as a chain, it is recognized that agency relationships are far more complex than a simple hierarchy. An individual may serve as agent to a number of principals at the same time and vice versa. A superintendent is the agent of the local board of education, to be sure; however, he or she may also find it appropriate to respond to the separate interests of the federal government, the courts, community leaders, a nationwide reform consensus, or organized teachers. Additionally, those who appear ostensibly to be the principals in an agency relationship (e.g., a local board) may sometimes become

the agents of their subordinates (e.g., the superintendent).

There is much more to the application of agency theory to education than indicated in this brief summary, and a more thoroughgoing description has been developed in Crowson and Boyd (1987). It should be mentioned once again that our conceptual framework is only a loose guide to inquiry at this early stage. Furthermore, it is not at all clear at present how agency theory can be instructive in an understanding of administrative leadership in education. Nevertheless, we would join Murphy (1989) in arguing the importance of examining organizational hierarchies in education--even at this reform-toward-decentralization time. Organizational structures, claims Murphy, are likely to move toward "balanced systems" of both central action and decentralization--with little known at present about valued behaviors, and particularly what it means to exercise leadership at either end of the organization. Suffice it for us to note that our "sense of agency" directs attention anew to inadequately explored topics of hierarchical linkages (both tight and loose) from the

superintendency down to the classroom in public schooling.

Tentative Observations

In our first "cut" at the data for 1988-1989, we have drawn five tentative observations/conclusions. The observations are accorded some "backgrounding," per the extant literature on the superintendency, then discussed and illustrated within the perspective of our early data. The observations include superintendents' relationships with their communities, their interactions with the local school board, a sense of risk in the superintendency, the nature of linkages between superintendent and school-site, and finally superintendents' perceptions regarding preparation for their administrative roles.

The Superintendent and the Community

We were frankly surprised by the degree to which superintendents' discourse involved discussion of their surrounding communities. One of the benefits of informal, non-directive interviewing (as an early-in-the-study technique) is its opportunity to

probe the subject's agenda rather than the interviewer's. With each superintendent, a sizeable portion of the interview was given to a subject-initiated discussion of community characteristics, patterns of development, values, foibles of the local populace, and the community-school relationship. Indeed, in one instance, the interview included a drive-around with the superintendent, with a running commentary on the community's history and its differing neighborhoods/perspectives. By no means did the superintendent's relationship with the local board of education fail to emerge in each interview, but our clear sense was that the community, as a whole, represents a separate reality to the superintendent.

Our earlier studies of the work lives of building principals evidenced far less attention to the school-neighborhood connection (at that level of organization) than was our sense of school-community importance in the thinking of education's top-level executives. Furthermore, principals appear to be heavily concerned with the socialization of parents or the involvement of parents in the life of the school, whereas

superintendents tend to worry about the school district's normative outreach to lives/perceptions in the entire community. By no means, however, is this finding inconsistent with the extant literature: (a) Parsons (1960) observed that the chief executive officer acts at a special institutional level of organization (directly concerned with blending the organization into its external environment); furthermore, (b) a steadily growing body of research into superintendent turnover supports the influences of community change and community dissatisfaction upon superintendents' length of tenure (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978; Weninger & Stout, 1989).

Our data at this early stage suggest that a key agency relationship between the surrounding community and the local superintendent embraces the moral imperative of the job. In their appropriately titled history of the superintendency (Managers of Virtue), Tyack and Hansot (1982) suggest that the value orientations of superintendents have remained remarkably constant since the late 19th century. These orientations typically spring from small-town origins

and "old-time" qualities of hard work, morality, order, and respectability (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 170). Indeed, in our own sample of 10 suburban superintendents, 7 have grown up on farms or in very small downstate communities. Their own discourse is laced with aphorisms: "above all be honest," "show respect, don't be pushy," "never try to sweep anything under the rug," "be patient and listen to others," "be seen as consistent and committed."

The mix of virtues between rural and suburban isn't always easy, of course, as one of our subjects explained to us:

> The Chicago area is a lot different, in many ways, from down home; and it takes getting used to. I'm still adjusting. People here are a lot less trusting, more skeptical. For example, if you tell somebody back home, "I'll look into that and get back to you," they know you'll do just that. Here, you can read it in their faces: "Oh, the great put-off; I'll never hear from this guy again."

Of special interest to us was the discovery that a number of our subjects considered their morals to have been critically tested early in the superintendency. In two of the cases, requests for political favoritism (e.g., a teaching job for the child of a board member) confronted the newly appointed superintendent. Another case involved the superintendent's determination to "take charge" of an aspect of district affairs which had been the fiefdom of another pillar in the community. A fourth superintendent regarded his test as the successful closing of a neighborhood school which had long defeated his predecessor. It is fascinating to note that the sense of being tested includes, as well, a sense of being normatively monitored by the larger community. As one superintendent illustrated:

> Last spring a bit of fat hit the fire when we contemplated moving a program from one building to another. The amazing thing was we were still doing the preliminary work on this; it hadn't reached the board agenda yet. Nevertheless, somehow a community grapevine developed, and lots of opposition surfaced, with

> people showing up to complain to the board about a proposal we hadn't even taken to the board. It can be that way often. Nobody will come to any of your board meetings. Yet, you even discuss a major change in-house, supposedly in secret, and word gets out.

Although not often faced by blatant "tests," our subjects also mentioned their feelings of expectations from the community--particularly expectations that they be active in committee work and volunteerism. With amusement, one subject mentioned that his community had been an unincorporated area at the beginning of his tenure, owning no police force of its own. With only a relatively inaccessible county police department to depend upon, this school administrator often found himself prevailed upon to settle family squabbles and neighbor-to-neighbor conflicts.

Strangely, discussions of the normative demands upon superintendents were accompanied by expressions of a necessary, but at times uncomfortable, distancing from the community. Despite a typically hectic work week that included a number of evenings per week in community

or district activities, the loneliness of the superintendency and the dangers of being too friendly with residents were often mentioned. Our superintendents talked, as well, of the necessary inner strength and go-it-alone self-confidence that a superintendent must have:

> S5: You have to be tough and self-confident. If you doubt yourself, you're not likely to be a good leader.
>
> S1: I feel a responsibility in this job to do things right, as I see them. Consistency is vitally important. You have to decide what's the correct thing to do, and consistently stay with it.

Not unexpectedly, some add to this the need for a bit of escape from it all. As one superintendent put it:

> It's important to get away from the job. I have a summer place in Wisconsin that we built from scratch--and I love it. I take no work there, no thoughts of work there, and relax completely. At least three and usually more nights a week are

work-nights for superintendents, plus many weekends. You have to be able to leave it--to get away somewhere.

In summary, the local school district superintendency may display a community consciousness as one of its central attributes. Furthermore, the sense of community for the superintendent seems to have an inclusiveness to it well beyond the more limited focus upon parents found typically at the school site. Interestingly, while a literature on the politics of local education speaks often of the political conflict surrounding the superintendency, our subjects saw the community relationship in far more normative terms. This finding, however, may be a direct result of an early-in-the-study sampling bias toward long-experienced, unusually successful administrators. Nevertheless, the finding fits a historical insight into the superintendency as a <u>manager of virtue</u> (Tyack & Hansot, 1982); and the finding suggests that the value orientation of the superintendent may be a prime component in the agency relationship between local education's chief executive and his or her immediate

environment. An early-in-tenure "testing-time" was viewed by the superintendents interviewed as less a political than a moral test of executive behavior.

The Superintendent and the Local School Board

> In a recent paper, Tallerico (1989) writes: Numerous scholars have spoken to the importance of continuing to seek ways to better understand superintendent and school board interaction. Gross (1958) asserted that "the relation between the board and the superintendent deserves intensive study....because they are at the heart of any educational problem and its solution" (p. 2). Some 25 years later, Cistone (1982) concurred and added that the focal point and "critical nexus (for local educational policy making) is the link between the board and the superintendent" (p. 1641). Yet, when compared to the emphasis afforded other key actors and relationships within the educational system, relatively little attention has been directed toward the superintendent-school board linkage as a target of research.

Our own research acknowledges the inadequacy of the extant literature on board-superintendent linkages. This literature frequently drifts off to other interests, including: (a) a determinedly prescriptive literature which seeks to separate policy from administration; (b) long scholarly debates on superintendents as "commanders" of "captive" boards; or, contrariwise, (c) analyses of superintendents who are in effect captives of their boards; then, finally, (d) more recent writings about board-administrator battles in the crucible of community conflict, and the "choreography" of these conflicts (see, Boyd, 1975, 1982; Ziegler, et al., 1985; Crowson, 1987; Wirt & Christovich, 1989; Tallerico, 1989).

While our study of leadership, organizational hierarchy, and the superintendency must pay much greater attention to the local school board in the future, our early inquiry does permit one observation of interest at this time. The observation is that despite a literature that talks frequently of the tension between board and superintendent, our subjects represented their board relationships in terms that spoke of cooperation much

more often than conflict (although a cooperation that often has negative overtones).

To be sure, there were some stories of relationships gone sour. One subject told of beginning a superintendency as an "outsider," with a clear change mandate. However, very quickly a local election and a revised board majority resulted instead in a change in the superintendency, and he was out! Similarly, a recent retiree talked, with some bitterness, about a new board that perceived the superintendent's management style to be out of date and out of touch with board expectations. This superintendent had taken pride for years in exactly the changed style of management that the board was now advocating.

There were also, to be sure, expressions of the need to socialize and/or "educate" the board. One subject mentioned that he too had a change mandate from an appointing board but viewed the board's objectives as unrealistic:

> Sometimes the changes that a board seeks are things you really can't do anything about--and you then have to educate them a bit. Sometimes you can make

changes short of the radical shake-ups expected by a board that in the end do convince them that change has been accomplished.

It's a fine line. The superintendents expressed time-honored sentiments about separating policy from direct administration and the advisability of setting limits to board-member intervention in the schools. However, our subjects were "old hands" at this, savvy veterans of board-administrator relationships; and the trick, as expressed by one, is: "You have to lead the Board without making them feel you're dominating them." One time-honored stratagem, for example, is to attribute one's own ideas to members of the board and then get said board members to buy into a line of thinking for which they have become spokespersons.

Again, despite stories of some interactions gone sour and stories of potential tensions wrapped in a necessary education of the board, our subjects expressed a sense of cooperation rather then conflict in the board relationship. These were long-experienced superintendents; thus there was often mention of a change over their careers in the composition of the

local school board. They noted particularly that businessmen-dominated boards, who tell the superintendent "you run the schools," have now been replaced by male and female professionals (e.g., lawyers, teachers)--and by housewives. One superintendent summarized:

> The women are different board members--often much better ones, hard workers. They are less concerned about dollars, and much more tuned into kids, teachers, and programs. They are detail people; they don't much want generality. They want specific information about what's happening in the buildings, in the classrooms. By no means can you put them off.

Far from a source of tension, these "new" boards seemed to represent a resource and a new form of partnership in school district administration--not conflict. Indeed, two of our subjects mentioned that amid the loneliness of the superintendency, some of their closest friendships were with board members. As one subject explained:

> You can't be friends with your teachers or

> principals. Acquaintances but not friends. Occasionally, the Board President becomes a friend, because you work often and closely together--and have to be on the same wave length. We'd meet for breakfast before every board meeting and go over every item, counting the votes. You get close.

A possibly deeper finding, however, and a lead that merits added attention in future inquiry, is that the cooperation between board and superintendent is also a carefully choreographed "negotiated system." Cooperation is not inconsistent with negotiation, for successful social exchange requires a foundation of trust (Barnard, 1938). Nevertheless, both board and superintendent bring differing perspectives and interests to the cooperative endeavor, plus differing strategies and bargaining resources.

A brief vignette, drawn (with name fictionalized) from our data to date, illustrates the point. In Superintendent Paul Morrisey's regular meeting with his Board, there occurred a lengthy, inconclusive discussion of the district's holiday policy. During the recent

holiday season, few complaints had been made, but surrounding communities had witnessed considerable unrest about either the excessive religiosity of the Christmas season, or, contrariwise, its over-secularization (banning all carols or activities that have a religious message). In its discussion, the Board worked from a small paragraph in the agenda notes prepared by the superintendent. The notes were non-directive--ending with the suggestion that it is appropriate to recognize major holidays, whether they be secular or religious--and in doing so, share with students the significance of all holidays in a pluralistic society. The paragraph ends by asking if the Board wishes to proceed with such a policy and, if so, how?

In his field journal, our researcher observes that from this "program note" it would appear that Morrisey had not yet himself worked through the problem to the point of recommending a course of action to the Board. But later, with Morrisey in his office a few days after the Board meeting, the researcher states:

I decided to inquire into the Board's handling of the holiday policy issue, saying to Morrisey that I gathered that he had not developed any working ideas on this, and that it was, in any event, a kind of no-win problem and that no one really knew how to deal with it. He responded quickly, "Oh no, that wasn't it. I know what we should do about this. I've talked it over with my administrative council and we've got some plans." This took me by surprise, because his "program notes" on the board agenda a few days previous had left the matter in the hands of the Board.
Our researcher's notes go on to indicate:
that Morrisey further reported that fortuitously, since the holidays and before the Board meeting, a parent had written a letter to the Board President expressing some concern about this holiday matter. Morrisey said he was partially relieved by this, that the letter to the Board President took the pressure off him somewhat, and that in effect that letter involved the Board President directly in the problem. The implication was that once the Board

President was substantively involved in the problem, then he would have to be the one responsible for leading the Board toward a solution.

As we can see, Superintendent Morrisey subtly negotiated with his Board of Education in the allocation of responsibility for a holiday policy. In this instance (as can often be the case) the Board President was unaware of a transfer of pressure from the superintendent to the Board. The superintendent orchestrated a move toward Board involvement by way of a non-directive agenda item, while at the same time preparing himself well with plans, if and when the Board wished to proceed.

Again, as Tallerico (1989) observed, there have been few studies of such "underlying dynamics" of board-superintendent relationships. In her own inquiry, Tallerico (1989, p. 9) concludes that: "...local educational governance is a dynamic social process of politically negotiated agenda-building. The process is neither random nor undemocratic, although clearly many important activities are subtle and unobservable to the

public." We believe it important to follow Tallerico's lead, exploring further the curious combination of cooperation and exchange (and subtlety) in the superintendent-board relationship. Although superintendents serve ostensibly as the agents of their local boards, by no means is the agency relationship one-way.

Risk Management in the Superintendency

While conflict is a popular construct in studies of the local superintendency, little attention has been paid to what may be one of its key psychological correlates: a sense of risk in the job. Nevertheless, Jane Hannaway (1989) claims:

> One of the primary personal objectives of managers is to avoid or reduce risk. Specifically, they do not want to be held responsible for mistakes. Of course, no one does. But I suspect the effort managers expend in this direction is greater than that expended by most other individuals (p. 56).

School superintendents were included in Hannaway's sample of managers; and, while we are unable at this

time to support her risk-avoidance finding, we would suggest that a sense of risk is very much a part of the superintendency. As one of our subjects put it:

> The superintendent has to put up with all the negatives--many more than ever come to the building principal. Complaints, claims of unfairness, all kinds of "concerns," the "buck" that's been passed up, parental anger or hostility about something someone lower down in the organization has said or done--all these come directly to the superintendent. He doesn't get many positives, just a lot of negatives.

In examining our interview notes, we were struck by the number of what we interpreted as risk-related comments to be found in superintendents' open-ended discourse. Among these are:

> S3: Time was when the superintendent of schools in any community was really a person held in respect. From the late 60s into the early 70s, the program lost this respect. Everything now is questioned. It used to be that the parent of a third grader would come

in with a complaint about the teacher, and maybe ask to have the child switched to a different teacher. You'd listen for awhile but explain to her that the child is in the only third grade in that school, and can't switch. Now, in today's climate, that sort of response doesn't wash. "Well, then fire that only teacher or transfer her; get a new one. I'm going to sue." Threats, harassment, hostility--it isn't the same. Add to this the financial problems of local districts today and the job becomes even less attractive.

S4: An earlier experience taught me not to move toward change too quickly. It taught me to keep an ear to the ground--to be keenly alert to the board, its composition, its perspectives. Also, to be visible--get out and about everywhere, with the antennae waving.

S7: It's best if a superintendent can stay out of the limelight. Involve the staff and give them credit for things. Make them look good

and by reflection you will also. The same is true of the board.

S6: I've been a stickler on the contract. I stick to it. No exceptions. If someone says, "my sister is getting married. Can I have one extra leave day?", my response is: "Joe, I'd love to do it, but the contract doesn't permit it."

One interpretation of these comments is that risk invites caution in the superintendency and sometimes a stick-to-the-rules rigidity. One behavior we did not uncover among our long-experienced subjects, however, was an avoidance of risk. Indeed, just the opposite was true. First, risk can add a bit of spice to the job:

S6: One great thing about the superintendency is that it's the same year after year but it's also not the same. There's the annual regularity--open school, negotiate, prepare the board agenda, put together the budget. Every year is the same. But every year is also different. Things come up, there's always a challenge. Sometimes it gets pretty

tense. It's the same; it's also different. I'll miss it.

Second, it is in discussion of the risky moments that superintendents talk of the "inner-strength" aspect of the job:

S8: You must maintain your credibility. If you say you'll do something--do it. Your word is your bond.

S1: When you go through the trying moments, it's the deep strength inside you that has to take over. You have to have high internal standards and expectations.

S5: Early this morning a principal called to warn that a father of one seventh-grade pupil has ripped up his son's report card and wants his son returned back to the sixth grade--back to his old school, out of junior high. That would devastate the boy, a terrible thing to do to him; but the father won't listen and plans to come to me and then to the Board. We get a lot of these--and our decision has to be what's best for the kid.

Interestingly, a key question in the discussion of risk in an executive's work life is the attendant consideration of reward. What do superintendents indicate as their primary rewards? To be sure, risks avoided or successfully side-stepped might conceivably be mentioned; however, while our subjects did address the topic of reward, they provided quite a different perspective. They often looked for hard evidence of accomplishment as indications of success. It would seem that amid the ambiguities and indeterminacies of a risky environment, one's rewards need to be found in visible, almost palpable accomplishments: a successful referendum, a grade-level restructuring of the school system, a smoothly orchestrated collective bargaining agreement, a well-handled school-closing decision. One of our subjects commented as follows:

> I've really been "on a high" the early part of this year, because we worked hard and received a positive vote on our referendum--when everybody had predicted defeat. You know most of the rewards in this business are psychological and come infrequently, but I'm satisfied with that. You get

> the biggest buzz on those rare occasions when someone says, "Good job on that referendum; it was very, very well organized." That kind of reward is about all you get; and of course I realize that 10 days later it's all gone, and you start from scratch once more.

In summary, further inquiry should explore in depth our sense that risk in the superintendency influences many executive behaviors and drives some of its rewards. In their study of public-sector organizations generally, McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast (1987) noted that the monitoring function of a political community tends most often to be reactive (of a "fire-alarm" variety)--in that dissatisfaction arises and is expressed only after (perhaps some ill-conceived or impolitic) bureaucratic action has been taken. The authors conclude that this form of monitoring enters as a cost in calculations of net benefits by public executives; never sure just when or under what conditions an alarm will be raised, they may be extremely cautious and overprotective.

The word <u>risk</u> is seldom used by practicing administrators; its existence as a managerial objective

must usually be "teased out" of observed behavior or discourse. Typically, risk-related comments (as our own quotes indicate) are wrapped within many other managerial themes and considerations. At the same time that superintendents display a sense of risk, their discussion can also incorporate themes of lost deference, increased conflict, changed role expectations, and continuing job challenges. Nevertheless, we would tentatively claim (following Hannaway, 1989) that avoiding or reducing risk is a key self-interest of superintendents--a self-interest that is rooted in the organizational incentive structure and reflected in the nature of hierarchical, or principal-agent, relationships.

The Superintendent and the School-Site

The open-ended discourse of superintendents includes frequent mention of "the schools." Asked to take a glance backward at the unfolding of a career in administration, their reminiscences are filled with tales of exciting times spent building schools, recruiting outstanding staff members to fill them, outfitting the schools, and developing programs within

them. No less central in superintendents' minds are later memories of school restructurings, school closings, and school maintenance issues (e.g., noise abatement, and asbestos removal). Although much distanced from the day-to-day activities of teaching and learning ("we have almost no contact with kids"), superintendents do think schools.

Nevertheless, despite their additional mention of frequent visits "out to" the schools, we sense that an operating norm of district administration within the superintendency is: "Leave the schools alone." This norm is typically accompanied by an added (somewhat contradictory) tradition of "no surprises": School principals are told to keep the superintendent informed. Because many of the "negatives" which reach the superintendency have school-site origins, the no surprises dictum protects the chief executive from the embarrassment of being caught unawares and provides some lead-time in preparing an acceptable response. One of our subjects (S2) put it this way:

> With principals, I tell them, "listen, I selected you because I thought you were the best person for

this job. It's your job. I'm not looking over your shoulder, but if you screw up, let me know. Be honest, tell me about things, because be assured I'll find out." You always do find out, you know.

The you-always-do-find-out comment frames our initial conclusion/observation regarding the superintendent-principal relationship, at this early stage of our inquiry. Hannaway (1989, p. 89) has observed: "Organizations, of course, attempt to prevent surprises. This is the main role that controls play within organizations; they direct behavior to insure reliable performance." However, with its few controls over both product and performance, and its notorious "loose-coupling," the local school district appears to place an information retrieval burden upon the superintendency. Our subjects spoke often of their efforts to become informed--as the following quotes indicate.

First, there was evidence of some grassroots-level idea generation:

S5: As a superintendent you have to try to get

things done through other people. You have little to no contact with kids. You're insulated--and increasingly so in larger and larger districts. It takes effort and time to get in close touch with people. I like to get in close touch with people. I like to administer informally. Get out to the buildings with no real agenda in mind, and just talk to whomever I meet. I might get into a long discussion with a sixth grade teacher, who'll spark an idea that I might check out in other buildings with other teachers--then eventually back to my own office and think it all through towards a new procedure or program.

However, second, the superintendent may discover that his or her own ideas are having trouble filtering through to the grassroots:

S9: You have to get out in the buildings. Get out to the teachers. Sometimes, I'd ask what they (the teachers) think about some matter, and they'd say "I haven't heard anything about

it." This would be after I'd explicitly asked the principals to share the item with their teachers. You have to be visible, and pick up these sorts of clues.

Third, effective fact finding is not always dependably assisted by one's top-level support staff. As one subject put it:

S2: Sometimes the central office people are reluctant to bear tales from the schools. You have to know to question them. If you ask what's going on, you'll get nothing. If you say tell me what happened the other day at School X, you'll get the whole story. They don't want you to think they're concealing something when you've already heard about it You can always tell in a staff meeting when you're getting an evasive answer--and it's time to start digging. You develop a sixth sense for this after awhile.

Finally, fourth, you learn best about what's going on by bypassing the rest of your administrative

hierarchy altogether--getting yourself somehow into a close psychic alignment with your classroom teachers:

> S4: You want feedback, go to the teachers, get into the classrooms. You've got to think and act at their level--find out what they want from administration, making a positive impression. Anticipate their needs and their lives. Half the battle with the whole school district is over if teachers sense that you're behind them and especially that you're super-organized about it--they have all their supplies ready and waiting on the first day of school. If all the forms and procedures are provided early and explained clearly, if everything is thought of and ready and schedules are worked out/coordinated before they think to ask, [then they are willing to cooperate].

In sum, our findings on the topic of the superintendency and the school-site are thus far consistent with Hannaway's (1989) observation that CEOs are often forced to operate "with only limited and

perhaps biased information about what is going on in their organization" (pp. 91-92). While buying into a tradition of loose top-down control over principals, superintendents also bear the costs of things "gone wrong" throughout the organization. Obtaining information and developing strategies/abilities (e.g., a "sixth sense") to open up channels of communication are vital top-level administrative duties. That major gaps in understanding and perception persist between the central office and the school-site, however, is documented well in preliminary results from Kroeze's (1989) yet-to-be-completed dissertation--wherein superintendents and principals within the same local districts are displaying wide differences in what both claim to be occurring and in what both identify as priorities within the schools.

Preparation for the Superintendency

Interestingly, few of our subjects to date have harked back to an accumulation of administrative expertise as memorable training for the superintendency. Some moved through a succession of lower-level administrative positions, others did not. Some more or

less jumped into the job; indeed, they expressed their feelings of surprise at a relatively sudden and unanticipated push upward in career. Two of our subjects, for example, were propelled into the position upon the illness of their own superintendents--thus talked of having to learn quickly, on-the-job, but talked also of the confidence that came to them as they stumbled through their early days in the role successfully ("Hey, I can do this sort of thing").

Although "accidents of opportunity" (e.g., a sudden push upward, falling into the job) were in evidence and references to the value of accumulating experience were not, nearly all of our subjects mentioned a mentor. For a number of our superintendents with downstate origins, the mentor was an older administrator who hailed originally from the same rural community, knew our subject well when "back home," and recruited our interviewee into Chicago-area administration. For others, the mentor was a professor with whom our superintendent had formed an acquaintance during a doctoral program. Or, as a third form, the mentor was occasionally a superintendent who "brought" our subject

"along" within his or her first-employment district--indeed plucking the young subject directly out of the classroom into administration. We discovered that a small number of Chicago-area districts have a reputation for being especially adept at "administrator-production," and are the suppliers of administrative talent among school districts throughout suburbia.

Interestingly, some valued training, referred to by nearly half of our (almost all-male, late-in-career) subjects, was the military service; it was the army, in retrospect, that they saw as a career-shaping experience. Subject S7, for example, observed:

> Superintending is really so much more of an art than anything else. Conditions change; you have to be flexible. In dealing with change, you have to have a capacity to relate well to all types of people. You have to be able to adapt--to take people for what they are. I think I learned a lot of this in the service. I was just 20 and already in command of a unit that included everything from draftees with Harvard degrees to

kids fresh out of the hills somewhere. You had to learn to use people-skills, and that was a good experience for this farm boy from Illinois.

To be sure, the image of the military as preparation for administration is that of a top-down, authoritarian, directives-issuing, and obeisance-demanding leadership. Beyond its gender bias of past decades, the armed forces as socializing agent would not spring to mind as modern-day preparation for the loosely-coupled and teacher-autonomy-minded profession of education. Nevertheless, although our subjects may have been decidedly "command-oriented" at one time in their careers, it is a set of "people-skills" and the art of superintending that they now, in retrospect, attribute to a military experience. Indeed, with all of the subjects, whether it was through an early-command assignment in the military or through some other form of socialization, the art of superintending was the message to us far more often than the technical knowledge of the job.

S1: To be sure, you have to become knowledgeable about a lot as superintendent. But the really

critical thing is dealing with people. If you do this well, you can learn all the rest.

S4: You have to have some pretty solid human qualities--warmth, an ability to relate to people. But you also have to provide a sense of mission--and be consistent about it, deciding what's the correct thing to do and staying with it.

S7: I'd suggest to any aspiring superintendent that a secret is patience and listening to others. A key is being skillful in accomplishing what you want without hurting the feelings of others.

In short, it would appear, thus far, that inquiry into superintendent preparation (if it is to be an element in the understanding of CEO leadership) should include very careful attention to the effects of mentoring as well as to such skills as patience, listening and speaking, consistency, human relations ability, warmth, and a good sense of humor. By no means can it be claimed at this point that the career ladder, graduate training in administration, or a body of

technical knowledge are unimportant subjects for further research. However, the larger art of superintending--the People Sphere--has been little investigated, and seems to merit added depth.

Summary and Conclusions

In an inquiry that has just begun, our minimally structured "life-history" interviews of veteran executives in local education (plus a few days of direct observation) have led us thus far to the identification of five dimensions of the superintendency--all of which, we sense, warrant much further study. These, briefly summarized, are:

1. The superintendent's relationship with the surrounding community--striking us as intensely normative rather than overtly political in its day-in and day-out interactions.

2. The superintendent's involvement with the local school board--surfacing as a much more cooperative albeit negotiative, relationship than the extant literature implies.

3. The risk-constrained nature of the superintendency--a little-investigated phenomenon of the role, with potentially important behavioral consequences vis-a-vis information flow, the reward structure, and the allocation of administrative effort.

4. The superintendent-principal relationship--where our preliminary finding supports an "administrative distancing" between central office and the school-site, as already noted by other investigators (e.g., Hannaway & Sproull, 1978-1979; Kroeze, 1989; Peterson, 1984).

5. The phenomenon of superintendent preparation--with hints that training in the "soft" dimensions (e.g., "people-skills") of leadership may be of more importance than training in "hard" skills (e.g., technical knowledge).

What does this preliminary data provide by way of some hints toward further inquiry into, and an eventual illumination of, leadership opportunities in the school district superintendency? We would suggest two.

First, despite the nation's current reform-minded press toward decentralization in school administration,

there are also key leadership demands upon central office personnel. Themes of decentralization (school-based management, bottom-up decision making, teacher empowerment, shared control) have become the governance by-words of the late 20th century. The notion is that overly centralized school districts should now be decentralized toward enhanced participation and professionalism. However, it would be a serious flaw of reform, argues Murphy (1989), to believe that one must choose between centralization and decentralization. Rather, the likelihood is that local schooling will move increasingly toward a more balanced system of both centralized and decentralized control--with new images of what it means to be a strong superintendent alongside new visions of school-site autonomy and teacher professionalism.

Our inquiry suggests, at this early stage, that at least three centralized contributions of the superintendency may be important leadership functions within a balanced system:

1. Whatever its structure, any public-service organization will require attention to, and an

allocation of, responsibility for risk. Indeed, political risk is often the foundation of centralizing initiatives. Rules from on high frequently seek a standardization of behavior for fear of the consequences of favoritism, blunder, or neglect among client-servicing personnel.

2. From the organizational summit one source of risk may be a failure to consider the "big picture" amid the many "little-pictures" of school-site involvement. For example, superintendents often take care to seek an equalization of instructional and personnel resources between the various schools--amid an environment, as one superintendent put it, "where each school wants just what all the others have plus something unique and extra all of its own--which, if you think a bit about it, just isn't possible."

3. Although Parsons' (1960) identification of an institutional level of activity for the superintendency has not received in-depth inquiry, it would appear that acts of relating the organization to the larger social system ("pattern--maintenance" behaviors) are of great importance--involving that which ranges from the

normative vis-a-vis the surrounding community to the negotiative in policymaking with the local school board. Thus, a balanced system of leadership in public education may well retain some centralization in at least the three areas of risk-management, the big picture, and activities of pattern maintenance.

Our second summarizing suggestion is that evidence may already be accumulating (even among our sample of long-experienced and nearly all-male administrators) of a newer, softer administrative style than has typically been attributed to the superintendency. The literature to date places either a conflict perspective (e.g., Blumberg, 1985; Wissler & Ortiz, 1988) or an administrative control perspective (e.g., Peterson, 1984) upon the superintendent's leadership. Murphy (1989) warns, however, that a strong superintendent in future years is likely to be less a "take-charge boss than an unheroic and more consultative leader" of school district organization. Working with others toward a shared vision, nurturing the development of leadership at lower levels, facilitating, finding common ground, listening and persuading--these are among the behaviors

of modern-day chief executives in local education. Inadequately attuned to these softer dimensions in our own early field work (and thus missing, for example, some of the teamwork superintendents engage in), our study nevertheless has discovered thus far the considerative qualities of culture and choice in executive leadership (e.g., a community-consciousness, risk-consequences, personal investment, people-skills, a "testing-time," board cooperation) far more than it has reflected the traditional businesslike dimensions of administrative direction, power politics, top-down goal setting, efficiency of operation, and bags of managerial tools. Just as local school administrators knew that their organizations were loosely-coupled long before academics discovered this phenomenon (McPherson et al., 1986), the scholarly community may be well behind education's practitioners in an appreciation of today's demands for a more considerative form of executive leadership.

Author Notes

Note that our own small sample to date may be unusually biased toward community-conscious superintendents--in that nearly all of our subjects are long-time "survivors" of much change in their respective communities; furthermore, all subjects thus far have administered Chicago-suburban, multi-community school districts, which may call for greater community-as-a-whole vigilance than might be the case with less heterogeneous environments.

In the minds of principals, of course, the controls may be much less than the superintendents have indicated. A number of our superintendent subjects mentioned that procedures for the evaluation of principals were nonexistent when they took over their districts, but their districts now have them. Nevertheless, the superintendents also indicated that one of the most difficult of jobs is the removal/replacement of a principal--for the principals are often well endowed with their own power base of school-site parents, teachers, and community supporters.

Note that all of our sample of 10 superintendents had classroom teaching experience (6 at the elementary

level, 4 in high school). Six of our subjects moved from the classroom into a principalship, one moved directly from the classroom into the superintendency of a small rural district, and 3 moved from classroom teaching into a central office slot following graduate work towards a doctorate in administration. Two of our subjects moved directly from a school principalship into the superintendency. Except for the one mentioned earlier, who jumped from the classroom to CEO, the other 7 subjects inhabited central office positions (e.g., Director of Personnel, Director of Instruction, or Assistant Superintendent) immediately prior to climbing to the superintendency.

Of course, sudden opportunities may not be all that accidental. There is the well-worn axiom of making oneself ready for opportunities before they occur. It is possible that the CEO mentality is developed out of this habit in our younger years; that is, those of us who want to advance in a career get ready for those upward steps before the door opens. Doing these things with no immediate pay off in sight requires a long-range perspective on the part of the individual--the ability

to see oneself at the next rung of the ladder and to translate that vision into an agenda of things to achieve before the possibility occurs.

Although we cannot generalize from a sample of one, there was an interesting contrast between our single female subject and her male counterparts on the topic of technical knowledge. One male retiree noted: "You can't know everything as an administrator, and you have to be willing to first admit then do something about your ignorance. Go to people for help. Be honest about what you don't know."

A female retiree: "You can't show any ignorance about things like asbestos removal, mathematics, or school finance--things that would support a stereotype of a woman as not up to the manly subjects. I've been a big proponent of and am pretty much up on computers for just this reason. Yes, there's a double standard. Sometimes you just sit back and smile."

A caution is in order here. By no means should the oft-noted conflict aspect of the superintendency be dismissed from further in-depth inquiry. We are

indebted to our Urbana colleague Fred Wirt for the following comment on an earlier draft of this paper:

> In discussion of the new "considerative" role, the thought came: What if the role is not permitted because of the political context? I think of superintendents caught up in the big-city whirlpool of multiple interests that would seek to override a considerative approach. Your role is properly abstracted from sites that are not of this kind, of course. Does that make a difference? Is there some other kind of leadership involved then?

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